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How do I do and support pedagogical action research in higher education?

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Background

Background to the research

This paper is an account of my professional learning as I do and support pedagogical action research in higher education. It offers descriptions and explanations of my practice as I work as a professional educator academic, administrative and support practitioners in relation to how we can improve the quality of teaching and learning in our institution by improving our own understandings of practice in order to help one another and our students to do the same. Our collective university-wide research practices therefore come to stand as a form of institutional research that has implications for how practices within the University are theorised, and so comes potentially to form a new curriculum for higher education, that may have implications for systemic influence for new thinking and practices.

Research Questions

Focus of the enquiry

The focus of the enquiry is developing understanding of my own work and role as I ask questions of the kind, 'How do I improve my practice?' (Whitehead 1989) as I support colleagues in raising their research capacity in the form of undertaking their higher degrees and writing for publication. This is not only a current requirement for higher education practitioners (see various recommendations by HEFCE for submission to research assessment exercises: http://www.hefce.ac.uk/research/ref/reform/) but also the expressed aims of our institution as an inclusive and accessible university that provides student centred curricula with excellent teaching (see York St John website: http://w3.yorksj.ac.uk/about/vision--strategies/key-strategic-aims.aspx However, in order to provide excellent teaching, the academic staff themselves need to evaluate their pedagogical practices and produce their accounts to show that they are justified in claiming their teaching as excellent, as well as explicate the ontological, epistemological, methodological and ethical values bases that provide the rationale for their practices.

Methods

Research methods/mapping the literature

This self-evaluation is accomplished through an action research frame (McNiff and Whitehead 2006), that requires practitioners to test the validity of their claims to improved practice, by producing an authenticated evidence base in which to ground the claims, and implementing rigorous validation procedures for the legitimation of those knowledge claims. The legitimation procedures focus on demonstrating the achievement of nominated criteria that aim to establish the truthfulness of the claim, and draw on the work of key authors, including Habermas's (1976) social criteria of truthfulness, sincerity, authenticity and knowledge of normative backgrounds: Lather's (1991) criteria of ironic validity; and Winter's (1989) criteria of reflexive and dialectical critique. By explaining how we are fulfilling these criteria, we can also demonstrate how and why we feel justified in claiming that we are demonstrating validity – producing the goods, in our case social, epistemological and moral goods – and so are justified in making further claims about the virtuousness of our academic practices (see Nixon's 2008 ideas on The Virtuous University). Furthermore, we follow Whitehead's (2009) steer in explicating how our values emerge in practice as our living criteria and standards by which we make judgements about the quality of our practices and research.

Frame

Analytical and theoretical framework

We draw on key authors to ground our practices and test the validity of our knowledge claims, including the following:

·   Barnett's and Di Napoli's ideas on the need for deconstruction and reconstruction of identity in higher education in light of ever-changing social, economic and political contexts;

·   Barnett's and Maxwell's (2008) ideas about wisdom in the university and the need for wisdom enquiry;

·   Boyer's (1990) ideas on a scholarship of teaching; and O'Meara and Rice's (2005) ideas on an evaluation of the sustainability of the ideas;

·   Nixon's (2008) ideas about the virtuous university and the moral bases of academic practice;

·   Norton's (2008) ideas about action research in higher education as a form of pedagogical research;

·   Rowland's (2000) ideas about the enquiring university teacher and (2006) ideas about the enquiring university;

·   Whitehead's (2009) ideas about developing new epistemologies for a new scholarship of educational knowledge.

Research findings

Research findings and contribution to knowledge

The research reported here has direct relevance for contemporary discourses about the nature of pedagogical research, and therefore about the purposes of higher education and how HE practitioners can achieve those purposes. By making public our individual and collective research, colleagues and I are contributing to a reconceptualisation of educational theory, as it informs and emerges from educational practices. Such knowledge of practice in turn contributes to establishing Higher Education as an influential voice in debates about what constitutes a decent society (Margalit 1998) and how it may be achieved.